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ABSTRACT

C-LERN (California Local Education Reform Network) is the application of failure avoidance technology in California schools with a high concentration of at-risk students. Aimed at total school improvement, C-LERN was piloted in various Sacramento area schools before being launched as a joint venture of the State Department of Education and Sage Analytics International during the 1987-88 school year. This report summarizes a survey of site leaders participating in two C-LERN summer institutes held in 1989. Additionally, school staff attending the evaluation sessions were interviewed regarding their experiences and assessments of the process. Analysis of the 319 surveys returned showed that many respondents lacked sufficient experience with C-LERN to answer all the questions. The 148 respondents with less than a year's experience with C-LERN were excluded from the second round of survey analysis, leaving a subset of 171 more experienced respondents on which to base the findings. This subset included 92 teachers, 15 principals, 7 vice principals, 4 counselors, 2 students, 5 parents, and 13 others. Generally, C-LERN summer institute participants were greatly satisfied with the process. Most respondents (75 percent) said they were clear about C-LERN goals and 67 percent believed that problems were accurately identified and that the process had clarified their school mission. Participants expressed concerns about failure terminology and implementation and development issues. Recommendations for improving, expanding, and evaluating the program are provided. Appendices present the survey instrument and tabulated responses. (Eight references) (MLH)

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California Local Educational Reform Network (C-LERN): A Formative and Preliminary Evaluation

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1989

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Introduction

What is C-LERN? Simply put, C-LERN is the application of failure avoidance technology, developed by Sage Analytics International, in California schools with a high concentration of students at risk of school failure. C-LERN is a process intended to effect total school improvement.

The educational application of Sage Analysis in California began with the El Camino High School in Sacramento California in 1979 . The school was suffering from low achievement, poor attendance, teacher burnout, alcohol and drug abuse, and a general lack of support and apathy among students, staff, and parents. After undergoing Sage Analysis at the initiative of its new principal, the school experienced such a turnaround that in 1983 the principal, Joseph Petterle, and his staff were cited by President Ronald Reagan for their outstanding achievements (Stephens, n.d.). On the heels of this widely publicized success, the Sage Process was piloted in a number of Sacramento area schools. In the 1987-88 school year, C-LERN, the educational adaptation of the Sage Process, was officially launched in California as a joint venture of the California State Department of Education and Sage Analytics International.

At a time in which educational reform and renewal have once again risen to the top of the public agenda, the C-LERN intervention could be an important agent for school change. In many respects, for example, the program responds to the policy recommendations of several recent reports (ACSA Commission on Public School Administration and Leadership, 1988; Berman-Weiler Associates, 1988; California Commission on Educational Quality, 1988).

The C-LERN Process for school improvement is expected to take three cycles and five years. Cycle One (Year One) consists of four phases -- Orientation, Diagnosis, Prescription, and Intervention. Cycle Two (Year Two) follows with the Evaluation and the Adjustment and Implementation phases. Cycle Three (Years Three to Five) is the Institutionalization/Replication phase; schools are expected to recycle the change process with lessening assistance from C-LERN and to rely entirely on the school staff to continue the change process in Year Five (California State Department of Education, 1988). Yearly Summer Institutes are provided for Site Leadership Teams to acquire knowledge and training needed in the process and to develop or update site intervention plans.

Background of Far West Laboratory Involvement

Under the charismatic leadership of Dr. Shirley Thornton, Deputy Superintendent of California State Department of Education, C-LERN has attracted support from various public and private educational institutions such as the Far West Laboratory (FWL) and the College Board.

The Students At Risk Program at FWL, for example, initially offered to document and develop an in-depth case study of one school district's participation in the C-LERN Process. Such a case study would be useful as a formative evaluation on the target school district's improvement effort and might produce significant insights into the total C-LERN project.

The case study proposal, however, was revised in the second year to focus on a second school district because the first one did not fully implement the process. With the second school district, the FWL team hoped to be able to study the district's

experiences with all 4 phases of Cycle One. Unfortunately, the district's extraordinary and prolonged financial and other difficulties meant that the Sage field representatives could not provide entree for the research team.

Approaching the end of the second school year, an alternative plan was quickly put into operation: To survey the experiences of C-LERN Summer Institute participants, a captive population of site leaders from various districts and in various phases of the process. The C-LERN Survey (see Appendix A) was administered to all C-LERN participants at the Northern and Southern Summer Institutes in June and July of 1989. In addition, school staff attending the evaluation breakout sessions were interviewed regarding their experiences and assessments of the C-LERN process.

Methods

This report is based primarily on data collected through the survey and informal interviews with representatives of each Site Leadership Team at two workshops during the Summer Institutes. The final section, Discussion and Recommendations, also includes the researchers' insights gained from various meetings with the first school district, Sage Analytics and State Department representatives and from personal experiences at the four Summer Institutes (one Northern and one Southern per year) and one C-LERN regional conference at Los Angeles.

Surveys were administered at the Northern and Southern C-LERN Summer Institutes in June and July 1989. Because participants were asked to complete their surveys during the opening session of the institute, a high return rate was ensured. This approach also meant, however, that respondents who were new to the program were unable to make judgments on the process in general and the Summer Institute in particular.

Informal interviews were conducted with participants at the evaluation session the same afternoon. In most cases, Site Leadership Teams divided their group among the eight concurrent sessions.

Analysis of the 319 surveys returned showed that a large number of the respondents had not had sufficient experience with C-LERN to answer all the questions. Many, in fact, had their first contact with C-LERN at the Summer Institute. Some wrote in the margins of the survey, "too new to process," "don't know yet," or "too soon to tell." Others apparently chose *Neither Agree nor Disagree* for the same reasons. In order to see whether the data would show different results when "non-answers" or "too-new-answers" were eliminated, a second round of analysis was done with a subset of surveys.

The 148 respondents with less than a year's experience with C-LERN were excluded from the second round of analysis. As expected, the remaining subset of 171 surveys showed a decrease in the percentage of *No Answer* and *Neither Agree nor Disagree* choices. It was decided, therefore, that the subset of respondents that had more experience with C-LERN were better able to assess all phases of the process. Thus, findings reported here are based on the responses of the more experienced subset only.

Further, for the sake of greater clarity, the five choices of answers to questions 4 through 23 were collapsed into 3 new categories as follows:

- o AGREE = *Agree Strongly* + *Agree*
- o DISAGREE = *Disagree Strongly* + *Disagree*
- o NEUTRAL = *No Answer* + *Neither Agree nor Disagree*

Of the 171 survey responses included in the final analysis, there were 92 teachers, 15 principals, 7 vice principals, 4 counselors, 2 students, 5 parents, and 13 "others." Ninety elementary schools, 24 middle/junior high schools, 29 high schools, and 6 "others" were represented. The following are key findings from the analysis of the subset of data (for item-by-item tabulation of survey results, see Appendix B).

Findings

In general, C-LERN Summer Institute participants were greatly satisfied with the process. Most respondents (75%) said that they were clear about C-LERN goals and objectives, and 67% believed that problems were accurately identified and that C-LERN had clarified their school mission. Moreover, a majority of participants found the information provided by the Summer Institute to be helpful (64%), believed that the process helped them to grow professionally (63%), thought C-LERN was worth the effort (65%), and would recommend it to another school (64%).

What participants liked best about the C-LERN process is that it focuses on individual schools, provides school specific solutions, and encourages the broad participation of administrators, teachers, counselors, parents, students, and the community. As one guidance counselor commented, "It focuses on specific problems facing our schools. It offers ... solutions to these problems. It allows opportunities for growth for the entire school, teachers, students, community, parents." This last point was also made by a principal: "The process involves everyone, the parents, students, teachers, and all other school personnel which translates into total community participation and commitment."

In response to open-ended survey questions, and in the interview sessions, however, several concerns about the C-LERN process were raised. In general, these had to do with the C-LERN focus and terminology, implementation and development, and outcomes.

Focus and Terminology

Because the Sage Analysis is a tool designed to identify and eliminate problems and failures, many participants expressed concern over the "negative" focus. Some teachers, for example, resented the "failure language" used by Sage. Most administrators, on the other hand, were able to see beyond this issue and view C-LERN as an opportunity for school improvement. One principal, for instance, pointed out that "C-LERN and its quantified diagnosis is a good tool for the district to use to justify distribution of funds and resources." A parent said she liked "the idea that each school identifies their problem areas, because then the problems, once out in the open, can be worked on instead of pretending they don't exist."

A number of participants, both in the survey and in the workshops, complained about the terminology employed by Sage Analysis. Several objected to the "big words" used in the diagnostic books and wondered whether all staff could

decipher and then answer the questions accurately. As one site leader advised in the survey, "simplify the wording into everyday language. The time it took to decipher the wording was frustrating to even our teachers who are highly skilled in English." Another pleaded, "Please rewrite them in ENGLISH. This isn't anywhere near how our staff talks."

Implementation and Development

The majority of issues raised by the participants had to do with the implementation and development of the program at their school. Several site leaders, for example, were not clear about the C-LERN process and disliked the fact that it was imposed from outside. One principal admitted honestly in the interview: "I'm still in a fog about C-LERN. C-LERN is a burden. My staff still will not buy in. It's a top-down process, and it will be resisted." In fact, site leaders from various schools characterized the initial staff reaction as "extremely negative," and some of the newcomers at the Summer Institute were openly skeptical about what C-LERN could accomplish at their schools. As one teacher pointed out, "there were simply too many past projects started and dropped in no time." Another teacher reported that at her school staff believed that "C-LERN is shoving things down our throats." A principal, upon hearing that his school was designated as a C-LERN school, had a number of meetings with his staff first before the onset of the Sage Analysis; he said, "this might have prevented even stronger resistance."

In general, the principals appeared to be more knowledgeable and feel more positive about C-LERN. However, one principal said in the interview: "We want the $10,000 back! C-LERN didn't tell us anything that we didn't know. We have done all kinds of school assessment and evaluation -- PQR, etc. How is C-LERN different from these?" On the other hand, a teacher from a different school site reported that the school leadership "is able to integrate C-LERN with a number of other programs."

Developing and maintaining schoolwide involvement and motivation among staff was seen as a difficult challenge in the C-LERN process. While 74% of the survey respondents stated that three-fourths or more of their staff was involved in the C-LERN process, in the interviews, a somewhat different picture emerged. At many sites, it seemed, only a small core of staff, the site leadership team, stayed informed and engaged in the process. Although the site leadership teams were enthusiastic about C-LERN and its attendant activities, they were often in the minority in their own respective schools and had only limited success in getting the entire school excited by and committed to C-LERN.

In response to Survey Question 7, *Motivation among staff remains high*, 33% of respondents selected "disagree." As one site leader reported, "our school is at the intervention stage. Many staff will not accept the interventions. Even though all have had a chance to participate in the process and to speak out, the staff's perception is that we (the site leadership team) make decisions for them." Motivating staff and maintaining their enthusiasm seems to require that the program show some tangible gains and outcomes early in the process. This may pose a dilemma for the C-LERN process which, by design, is meant to take time to implement and come to fruition.

There were also concerns raised over personnel stability. How can Sage Analysis and C-LERN keep pace with changing administrators and faculty? At one school, according to one of its site leaders, the principal was diagnosed by C-LERN as a major problem on site and was removed. Remaining staff now wondered what would happen with the new principal in the coming school year. The same site

leader observed, "you don't really hear that much about C-LERN in the school."

Similar concerns over the flexibility of C-LERN in meeting the changing needs of the school and staff were voiced, for example, by a principal who had had two years of rather positive experience with C-LERN: "We're still in the process of dealing with problems identified in the first year. But new problems are starting to appear. How do we deal with them? How does C-LERN deal with that?"

Outcomes

Most survey respondents and participants in interview sessions agreed that concrete, measurable outcomes had not yet been identified. Surveys showed that most participants were still unclear about the results of the C-LERN process. For those questions relating to outcomes or effectiveness of the C-LERN process, more than half of the respondents were noncommittal. When asked if intervention strategies had been effective, whether or not results were permanent, and whether or not C-LERN had accomplished goals, most respondents gave a neutral response.

An open-ended survey question (26), *What evidence is there that C-LERN is effective?*, produced five types of answers. Nearly half (44%) left the question blank. Those who responded, for the most part, specified an increase in participation, cooperation, and team work. Only 6% were able to point to a decrease in a targeted problem such as truancy or discipline.

Although 56% of respondents reported having been involved with C-LERN for two years or more, most still failed to see any significant outcomes. Nearly a fourth said they had seen "no growth, no improvement at all." However, upon reflection some participants pointed out in the interview sessions that C-LERN had made it possible for them to make some important changes. As one teacher put it, "C-LERN did get the school board to paint the school for the first time in 30 years. The garden was also planted. The school pride generated from these is considerable. Now there is also more parent involvement."

These findings suggest that the C-LERN process has not been implemented long enough to produce any measurable differences. Given the 5-year timeline of the C-LERN process, it may really be too soon to observe any significant changes. Further, unless more attention is given to evaluation and assessment, the schools may never be prepared to make those judgments. Most of the survey respondents reported, for example, that there was little consideration for evaluation. In the survey, only 42% agreed that *Evaluation of the process is ongoing and effective*; 20% disagreed; and 38% indicated being neutral. In response to Question 25, *If you could change or improve the process, what would you do differently?*, 16% noted that they would provide better information, support, and evaluation; another 37% did not answer or indicated that it was too soon to tell.

Discussion and Recommendations

In a little more than two years, C-LERN has spread to over 95 schools. In addition, C-LERN has clearly generated energy and momentum among the schools it has served. Given the planned 5-year cycle of the C-LERN process, however, a summative evaluation of the outcomes and effectiveness of C-LERN is obviously premature. Furthermore, it is clear that the more subtle and long-lasting effects of this energizing and renewal process cannot be easily measured and described.

The majority of Summer Institute participants expressed satisfaction with C-LERN. Most praised the program and said they appreciated the opportunity to participate. We cannot say for certain, however, whether C-LERN is generally well-perceived and whether C-LERN is mobilizing the school and community toward school improvement as intended. Participants at the Summer Institutes were self-selected and likely the most motivated among the C-LERN participants. Similarly, the respondents who took the trouble to answer the open-ended questions were probably those who felt most strongly or were the most outspoken.

C-LERN is not without detractors, however, as shown in the above section. While the concerns and questions raised earlier about C-LERN may very well be part of the normal growing pains that result from the rapid expansion of a complicated and comprehensive process, they are real, nevertheless, and should be given consideration.

Despite these caveats about the limitations and formative nature of this study, our involvement with C-LERN has enabled us to develop a number of insights into the program and its implementation. With this background, we offer the following recommendations.

1. Strengthen the linkages between identified problems and solutions.

A serious question we have about C-LERN is the extent to which prescriptions and interventions are closely linked to identified problems and barriers. Many Summer Institute participants seemed unsure how the Institute programs fit their school and how they would be sustained. There was also some question as to whether site leaders and their staff were truly empowered to do what is necessary to turn the school around. Would they have the authority to make changes in the coming fall? How can staff buy-in be assured? As desirable as Summer Institutes may be to some participants, without site-specific intervention strategies and know-how, and without site-based authority, participants may have difficulty accomplishing the goals and objectives set by C-LERN.

2. Proceed more deliberately in C-LERN expansion.

There were several indicators that C-LERN is being spread too quickly. Without well-trained Sage field representatives readily available to serve all the participating schools, new personnel had to be quickly recruited, trained, and dispatched to the sites. Quality control across sites, therefore, may become a significant problem. In fact, participants' varied perceptions of C-LERN might very well be a result of the differential ability and training of Sage representatives. We understand the tradeoffs that must be made between careful implementation in fewer sites and quick dissemination into many more sites in order to meet the urgent needs of urban schools. However, uneven implementation could place the entire program at risk.

The evangelical zeal of C-LERN proponents will undoubtedly contribute to the ultimate success of the program; the same zeal, however, may also jeopardize its orderly and effective implementation. Witness the fact that nearly half of the total survey respondents began their participation in C-LERN at the Summer Institutes. Without having gone through proper orientation, diagnosis, and prescription phases first, it is not surprising that many expressed confusion and felt overwhelmed by C-LERN. How many of these participants will become effective and convincing

leaders once they return to their school sites?

3. Consider a more complete evaluation of C-LERN.

If funds are available, a full-scale evaluation of C-LERN should be conducted. In the present climate of accountability and performance-based funding, such an evaluation would help to ensure adequate resources and full implementation of the program. Care must be taken in designing the evaluation, however. C-LERN is a broadbrush, multisite program/process which is highly context dependent, variedly implemented, constantly changing, inadequately funded, and understaffed. Like Cities-in-Schools (Stake, 1986), it should not be evaluated in the traditional, quantitative, and summative fashion.

A meaningful and useful evaluation of C-LERN will require creativity and sophistication with social science methods. We can see at least two alternatives: An indepth multilevel ethnography of one school site or district (Guthrie, G.P., 1985) which will provide multiperspective insights into the actual implementation and effect of the process; and a multisite quantitative and qualitative as well as summative and formative evaluation (see Guthrie, L.F. & Guthrie, G.P., 1988).

In summary, we applaud the energy and resources called forth by C-LERN. To make it truly effective and successful, however, more finetuning and careful attention will be required. In a sense, by pointing out the observed shortcomings and possible shortfalls of C-LERN, we have modeled our preliminary evaluation after the failure avoidance technology of Sage Analysis. By eliminating certain weaknesses and avoiding the pitfalls, C-LERN could play a major role in restructuring and rejuvenating California schools.

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APPENDIX A:

SURVEY INSTRUMENT

C-LERN SURVEY

June/July 1989

Developed by The Students At Risk Program

Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development

C-LERN SURVEY

June/July 1989

Please fill in the following:

Name (optional):_____

School:_____

District:_____

Position:_____

Please circle the letter which matches your response most closely:

1. How long have you been involved with C-LERN?
   a) Less than a year
   b) 1 year
   c) 2 years
   d) 3 or more years

2. In which phase of the process are you?
   a) Orientation
   b) Diagnosis
   c) Prescription
   d) Intervention

3. What percent of the staff at your school is in the C-LERN process?
   a) 100%
   b) 75%
   c) 50%
   d) 25% or less

	Agree Strongly	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Strongly
4. I am clear about the goals and objectives of C-LERN.	a	b	c	d	e
5. Problems and root causes in my school were accurately identified.	a	b	c	d	e
6. The field representative has been very helpful.	a	b	c	d	e
7. Motivation among staff remains high.	a	b	c	d	e
8. Evaluation of the process is ongoing and effective.	a	b	c	d	e

	Agree Strongly	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Strongly
9. C-LERN has been implemented on schedule.	a	b	c	d	e
10. Intervention strategies have been effective.	a	b	c	d	e
11. C-LERN attempts to address too many problems at once.	a	b	c	d	e
12. I can see the results of C-LERN already.	a	b	c	d	e
13. Results seem to be permanent.	a	b	c	d	e
14. C-LERN has accomplished stated goals.	a	b	c	d	e
15. C-LERN has helped clarify our school mission.	a	b	c	d	e
16. The climate of my school has improved.	a	b	c	d	e
17. My school has been restructured for the better through C-LERN.	a	b	c	d	e
18. The Summer Institute is helpful in providing information on alternative intervention strategies.	a	b	c	d	e
19. The Summer Institute provides workshops on all the problems identified in my school.	a	b	c	d	e
20. The Summer Institute is well placed in the timeline of the C-LERN process.	a	b	c	d	e
21. C-LERN has helped me grow professionally.	a	b	c	d	e
22. C-LERN is well worth the time and effort.	a	b	c	d	e
23. I would recommend the C-LERN process to another school.	a	b	c	d	e

Please answer the following questions as completely as possible:

24. What do you like specifically about the C-LERN process? Why? _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

25. If you could change or improve the process, what would you do differently? ____

_____

_____

_____

26. What evidence is there that C-LERN is effective? In what ways?_____

_____

_____

_____

27. Please describe your school briefly (e.g., characteristics of the students, neighborhood, and so on) and the key challenges facing it._____

_____

_____

_____

_____

28. Additional comments:_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME AND ASSISTANCE!

APPENDIX B:

SURVEY RESULTS

TABLE 1
SURVEY SAMPLE

	N	%
School Type		
* Elementary	90	53
* Middle/Junior High	24	14
* Senior High	29	17
* Other	6	4
* No Answer	22	13
Position of Respondents		
* Principal	15	9
* Vice Principal	7	4
* Teacher	92	54
* Counselor	4	2
* Student	2	1
* Parent	5	3
* Other	13	8
* No Answer	33	19

TABLE 2

SURVEY RESPONSES: QUESTIONS 1-3

	N	%
1. How long have you been involved with C-LERN?		
* Less than 1 year	0	0
* 1 year	73	43
* 2 years	90	53
* 3 or more years	5	3
* No Answer	3	2
2. In which phase of the process are you?		
* Orientation	5	3
* Diagnosis	10	6
* Prescription	45	26
* Intervention	101	59
* No Answer	10	6
3. What percent of the staff at your school is in the C-LERN process?		
* 100%	108	63
* 75%	19	11
* 50%	12	7
* 25% or less	24	14
* No Answer	8	5

TABLE 3

SURVEY RESPONSES: QUESTIONS 4 – 23

		AGREE	NEUTRAL	DISAGREE
4. I am clear about the goals and objectives of C–LERN.	(N)	128	27	16
	(%)	75	16	9
5. Problems and root causes in my school were accurately identified.	(N)	114	38	19
	(%)	67	22	11
6. The field representative has been very helpful.	(N)	93	47	31
	(%)	54	27	18
7. Motivation among staff remains high.	(N)	57	57	57
	(%)	33	33	33
8. Evaluation of the process is ongoing and effective.	(N)	71	65	35
	(%)	42	38	20
9. C–LERN has been implemented on schedule.	(N)	92	48	31
	(%)	54	28	18
10. Intervention strategies have been effective.	(N)	59	94	18
	(%)	35	55	11
11. C–LERN attempts to address too many problems at once.	(N)	79	52	40
	(%)	46	30	23
12. I can see the results of C–LERN already.	(N)	68	62	41
	(%)	40	36	24
13. Results seem to be permanent.	(N)	47	104	20
	(%)	27	61	12

TABLE 3 (continued)

		AGREE	NEUTRAL	DISAGREE
14. C-LERN has accomplished stated goals.	(N)	50	90	31
	(%)	29	53	18
15. C-LERN has helped clarify our school mission.	(N)	118	39	14
	(%)	69	23	8
16. The climate of my school has improved.	(N)	76	73	22
	(%)	44	43	13
17. My school has been restructured for the better through C-LERN.	(N)	68	82	21
	(%)	40	48	12
18. The Summer Institute is helpful in providing information on alternative intervention strategies.	(N)	109	57	5
	(%)	64	33	3
19. The Summer Institute provides workshops on all the problems identified at my school.	(N)	79	71	21
	(%)	46	42	12
20. The Summer Institute is well placed in the timeline of the C-LERN process.	(N)	94	72	5
	(%)	55	42	3
21. C-LERN has helped me grow professionally.	(N)	107	53	11
	(%)	63	31	6
22. C-LERN is well worth the time and effort.	(N)	111	53	7
	(%)	65	31	4
23. I would recommend the C-LERN process to another school.	(N)	109	48	14
	(%)	64	28	8

TABLE 4

SURVEY RESULTS: QUESTIONS 24 - 26

	N	%
24. What do you like specifically about the C-LERN process?		
• Diagnosis/focus/evaluation/ of problems, needs & weaknesses	57	33
• Intervention strategies, resources, information provided and sharing of ideas	48	28
• Collaborative effort of school personner, parents, students, and community	39	23
• Empowerment, freedom to express concerns, and ability to provide input	14	8
• Too soon to tell or no answer	42	25
25. If you could change or improve the process, what would you do differently?		
• Create/allow more direct input/participation, allow for changes in participation	30	18
• Provide better information, support, evaluation, and communication	27	16
• Be more specific in focus, simplify	17	10
• Improve timing of activities, provide timeline, better time management	16	9
• Explain funding options, provide funds	8	5
• Focus on positive aspects, not solely failures	6	4
• Nothing needs to change	5	3
• Too soon to tell or no answer	64	37
26. What evidence is there that C-LERN is effective?		
• Collaboration, participation, agreement, and cooperation	55	32
• Developed and implemented goals and intervention strategies	26	15
• Decrease in problem(s) targeted (e.g. less truancy)	10	6
• No evidence found	9	5
• Too soon to tell or no answer	76	44